



TRAVELERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

EDITED BY
SARAH BRUNING

▼
Flying over the
Himalayas into Paro,
home of Bhutan's only
international airport.



EXPERIENCES

Peaks and Valleys

Long a dream destination for mountaineers, Bhutan now has a cross-country trail network that's as accessible as it is thrilling. **Heather Richardson** takes a walk through the clouds.

HEATHER RICHARDSON



▲ Hanuman langurs, a species of monkey found in Bhutan.

MUST'VE SOUNDED like I'd run a flat-out 400-meter sprint. I was panting my way up a mountain outside Gyetsa, Bhutan, when my guide, Tshering Tobgay, suggested we stop for a break. It wouldn't be the last much-needed pause on our uphill slog, which would cover 2,000 feet of elevation. Finally, when we reached our destination, a lookout 11,150 feet above sea level, I plopped down on a convenient wooden bench. A cool breeze rustled the leaves. A gap in the tall, slender blue pines revealed a swath of thick, lush forest at the bottom of the valley and a range of shadowy peaks beyond.

Thankfully, this first stretch of my 10-day trek along the Trans Bhutan Trail, or TBT, was the hardest. I soon acclimated to the altitude and found my climbing legs. And not a moment too soon: the full TBT runs 250 miles across the middle of this small kingdom sandwiched between China and India. My plan was to hike nearly 100 miles of it, through dense pine and rhododendron forests, past crumbling Buddhist stupas, across frothy blue rivers, and up high mountain passes adorned with fluttering Tibetan prayer flags.

Such an expedition may sound ambitious—and at times, it was—but the beauty of the TBT is its accessibility. The route never strays too far from the country's



▲ Trekking the 250-mile-long Trans Bhutan Trail.

narrow, winding roads, and hikers are followed by a TBT support car, which ferries luggage and can offer an out in case of bad weather or other calamities. (It proved a godsend one day when I encountered a swarm of angry bees and decided to cut the day's hiking short.) Trekkers can easily mix and match sections of the route to their fitness or ability levels, too.

Though the TBT officially launched in September, many of its constituent trails are decades and even centuries old. Before roads came to Bhutan in the 1960s, everyone in the country traveled by foot—or horse, mule, or yak. In the 1930s, Bhutan's second king, Jigme Wangchuk, used some of the footpaths that are now part of the TBT to shuttle between his residences.



▲ Six Senses Thimphu, where the author stayed before the start of her hike.

During one stretch of my hike, I was joined by 64-year-old Dawe Tshering, who recalled his work as a postal messenger in the nineties. Before cell phones arrived in Bhutan, he would use these trails to pass missives between villages. Today, he guides visitors along some of those same routes, past yak-herder camps, across bubbling streams, to small communities where hikers can have hearty lunches of buckwheat pancakes and spicy dried beef in locals' homes.

▼ Trongsa Dzong, in the town of Trongsa, is one of Bhutan's most important fortresses.

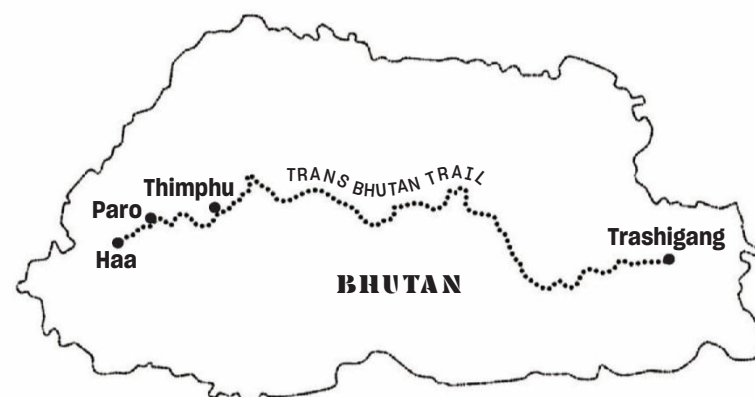
Bhutan's present-day king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, is also known to walk these trails, and many credit him with the idea to refurbish and unify the cross-country network. The Bhutan Canada Foundation

financed the clearing and signposting of the paths. Meanwhile, a nonprofit organization, also called Trans Bhutan Trail, oversees the system and helps international visitors plan and book trips.

The group helped organize my itinerary, and I was one of the first visitors to the country after it reopened. Upon arriving, I stayed at **Six Senses Thimphu** (sixsenses.com; doubles from \$1,750), which overlooks the fast-growing capital and its roughly 170-foot-tall golden statue, the Buddha Dordenma. The property, one of five that the brand has in Bhutan, was a blissfully tranquil place to recover after the long, three-flight journey from my home in Cape Town. One exception: I had hoped that soaking in the spa's traditional hot-stone bath would be restorative. But the buckets of fresh herbs, added to the seemingly boiling water, proved intolerably itchy, and I barely lasted five minutes.

From there, it was on to the mountains, where the accommodations were perfectly cozy if decidedly less plush. One morning, at a campground in central Bhutan's Ura Valley, I awoke to find the water in my bottle frozen solid. Peering outside, I saw an ice-blue mist hovering above the pearly frost in the weak early light. It's a testament to the snugness of my tent and bed that I didn't notice the sub-zero temperatures. (At another site, my sleep was less restful thanks to incessantly barking dogs.)

I also spent the night at several modest guesthouses. In the quiet Mongar district, in the eastern part of Bhutan, I stayed with a Buddhist lama, Ugyen Wangdi, who has lived there his whole life. Situated next to a small ▶





◀ The author crossing Punakha Suspension Bridge, near Thimphu.

with are fearful that such a change will have a negative impact on midrange hotels, guides, and Himalayan trekking operators. (The thinking goes that anyone who can afford the fee will only book five-star stays.)

One of the potentially positive effects of the TBT—assuming it does draw more visitors to Bhutan in the first place—is that the locally owned and family-operated outfits that sit along the route will get more attention. In Bhutan, that kind of interaction goes hand in hand with protecting culture and heritage. By tracing the footsteps of the walkers and wanderers of old, the TBT allows today's visitors to connect with the past, as well as the present. 🌐

transbhutantrail.com; treks range from two to 36 days; from \$3,449 per person for a typical nine-day itinerary, which includes the \$200-per-day Sustainable Development Fee.

▶ A one-bedroom villa at Six Senses Thimphu.



▶ monastery, his two-story house has a comfortable front room, where we sat on cushions around a low table and shared meals, and a spartan guest room with, I discovered, a rock-hard bed. "It's simple and peaceful," he said approvingly of his valley, with its scattering of whitewashed homes and rice paddies. Unlike many Bhutanese I met, he had no interest in moving to the capital—though he was quite curious about South Africa and whether people there are as enthusiastic about chili peppers as they are in Bhutan.

Meeting people like Wangdi was one of the most enjoyable aspects of the TBT, which connects communities rather than circumventing them, as many hiking routes do. My experience was far richer for the meals I shared, the hosts who welcomed me into their homes, and the villages and towns I passed through on my way to Trashigang, the eastern terminus of the trail.

Bhutan has held a cautious attitude toward tourism since first opening to international visitors in 1974. When the country reopened its borders in 2022, the government increased its daily visitor tax, known as a Sustainable Development Fee, from \$65 to \$200. Some tourism insiders I spoke

▶ The Buddha Dordenma, in Thimphu.

